

A Study of
“The Sale of Motherhood: Wet-Nursing and Slave Women in Colonial Cuba”
and
”Free People of Color in Spanish Mobile, 1780-1813”

Contemporary studies of slavery recognize the many different shapes and forms of the “Peculiar Institution” throughout its history. Slavery under European, African, or South American rulers resulted in dramatically different experiences. In the study of colonial slavery in the New World, Europe is in the position of power and our focus narrows on Dutch, Spanish, French, English, and American institutions. Among these empires, it is generally accepted that Spanish slavery was the relatively best situation to be enslaved in. Why? Although there is legitimate skepticism towards quantifying the quality of life, surely the enslaved would welcome a high rate of manumission and Spanish colonies allowed a larger percentage of blacks to gain their freedom. Authors Richmond Brown and Sarah Franklin demonstrate that the determination of enslaved men and women to make the most of their limited opportunities played as important a role as institutional advantages in their achievements.

Richmond Brown describes the possibilities for black people in the Spanish city of Mobile in his article “Free People of Color in Spanish Mobile, 1780-1813.” Sarah Franklin also examines slavery in colonial Spain in her article “The Sale of Motherhood: Wet-Nursing and Slave Women in Colonial Cuba.” Her subject is more explicitly gendered, focusing on the apparent paradox of slave wet-nurses in a society that reveres motherhood.

Brown uses a variety of sources—Church records, census results, and private business transactions—to depict the culture of Spanish Mobile at the turn of the 19th century and the opportunities within that culture for free people of color. The article starts by introducing us to Charles LaLande, who is used to represent the black elite of Mobile. A mason and a military man, LaLande has the three characteristics Brown argues are necessary for social acceptance by the white community: a trade-skill, military experience, and Church connections. That acceptance is possible at all is due to the small population of Mobile and the Spanish legal code. Brown writes that “colonial Mobile was a ‘face to face’ society and practicality prevailed over legality. The constant shortage of population and the lack of skilled workers...tended to minimize racial distinctions.” More important than this fleeting frontier egalitarianism was the imposition of Spanish law in 1780; owners no longer had to obtain council approval to manumit their slaves and the right to self-purchase was recognized legally.

Enslaved women benefitted disproportionately under this system. New Orleans’ notary records between 1781 and 1803 demonstrate that about two-thirds of the manumitted slaves were female (624 to 364). This imbalance was due to the prevalence of interracial unions between slave owners and their slaves. Brown argues that “most of the manumissions involved female slaves and their children, in many cases owners’ mistresses and offspring.” In colonial Spanish society interracial unions were accepted and the disparity between white women and men in Mobile fostered a high percentage of these relationships. In spite of their numerical advantage, free females of color are secondary figures in Brown’s examination of black culture in Mobile. Patriarchal norms prevented women from positions of power and subsequently we only catch glimpses of individual women as widows or mistresses benefitting from their male counterparts.

We are now familiar with the social and legal practices that differentiated the culture of colonial Spain from its European counterparts. The right to self-purchase and relative acceptance of interracial relationships created possibilities for social advancement for people of color. Brown argues “free people of color occupied important positions in Spanish Mobile and enjoyed a perhaps surprising range of opportunities.” He supports this argument with several examples of free black ownership of homes, businesses, and even slaves. Regis Bernoudy was a free man of color from New Orleans that bought a home on St. Charles Street worth \$3,400. At the time this was one of the nicest homes in the city, black or white owned. For financially secure men like Bernoudy, affiliations with the militia or the Catholic Church were all that remained to become accepted as a gentleman. The image of a respected, wealthy black man in Mobile juxtaposed with the hopeless plantation laborer of English colonies is a vivid example for the relative differences between the imperial powers.

Sarah Franklin shifts our focus from the mainland to the island colony of Cuba. And while Mobile, Alabama and Cuba today aren't *exact* replicas of each other, in the early 19th century both were Spanish colonies and shared many characteristics. The specific topic Franklin wishes to address is wet-nursing and the female experience of slavery. She uses slave advertisements to understand how these women were perceived by the white community and gain insight into the role of wet-nursing in that community.

Slavery studies have traditionally treated enslaved men and women as a homogeneous subject. The shared burden of manual labor in plantation slavery was thought to have erased any gender distinctions. It is true that female slaves toiled in the fields and were not afforded the same “fairer sex” prejudices assigned to white women; however, gender differences remained.

Being both a slave and a woman relegated you to the “lowest rung of the Cuban hierarchy”. Female slaves were stripped of the delicate stereotype that would have spared them grueling work in the fields, but did not benefit from an increase in their perceived ability to perform skilled labor. In many ways, these women got the proverbial “short end of the stick.” Male slaves had a monopoly on the skilled jobs. Masonry, shoe-making, and driving were all performed exclusively by men. Incredibly, from this position of apparent social weakness, female slaves were able to find avenues for their success.

Female slaves worked disproportionately in the cities. The particularly urban need for high numbers of domestic workers resulted in a high percentage of urban slave women. Franklin demonstrates that women dominated several domestic occupations: Nanny, Ironer, Maid, Laundress, Nurse, Sewer, Seamstress, Wet nurse, and Hair Stylist, for example. The urban setting for these occupations proved to be invaluable. With access to the marketplace, many women were able to make enough money to purchase their freedom. Because female slaves cost less than men, the amount needed to fulfill this ambition was lower as well—an unintended benefit of female marginalization.

Wet-nursing has not been included in past examinations of urban slave women’s paths to freedom. The demands of the job did not allow extensive contact with the market economy and therefore didn’t fit the prevailing pattern. Franklin does not wish to negate the market-access theory, but her data suggests wet-nursing should be recognized as yet another route to freedom utilized by slave women.

An examination of *Coartación* records, the legal status of slaves who had paid a down payment towards self-purchase, supports her argument. Franklin states that wet-nursing “appears

prominently in the skill set of *coartada* slaves for sale.” Because slavery births were infrequent the number of women able to be a wet-nurse was limited. The resulting discrepancy in supply and demand made wet-nursing a highly sought-after and profitable skill. Franklin urges further investigation into the intriguing role that wet-nursing played in colonial Cuba

The conclusion of “The Sale of Motherhood” is conjecture on why Spanish families were in demand of wet-nurses. We have already seen the benefits for participating black women. But as a society that reveres motherhood, it is perplexing why Spanish women would relinquish such an integral aspect of being a mother to a slave. Franklin confirms the priority of Motherhood in Spanish Cuba in her statement that “for white women, motherhood was esteemed above all else. And for upper-class white women, motherhood defined their role in society.” And also, “Motherhood for white women signaled great prestige.” The paradox is dismantled nicely with Franklin’s observation that Spanish motherhood was not defined by the mundane, daily acts of care such as changing diapers or breast-feeding but rather by a successful supervision of their development. She was the coach, not the player.

From this common-sense explanation Franklin ventures onto less stable ground. She proposes that an additional motive for slavery wet-nursing was population control. The reasoning is that the Haitian revolution had scared the white people of Cuba into paranoia about Africanization. They also understood that lactation delays pregnancy. Consequently, they implemented the practice of slavery wet-nursing to limit the number of babies born to slave mothers. This theory suffers from being unnecessarily complex and from ignoring other, easier methods of population control such as selling excess slaves for a profit. Her earlier theory centered on motherhood roles is strong enough to explain the phenomena on its own.

Richmond Brown and Sarah Franklin do an excellent job depicting the interplay between slave agency and institutional opportunity in their respective articles “Free People of Color In Spanish Mobile, 1780-1813” and “The Sale of Motherhood: Wet-Nursing and Slave Women in Colonial Cuba.” Brown’s snapshot of colonial Mobile brings to the forefront an image from slavery largely absent from common understanding: prominent free people of color. Their wealth and social standing are a testament to the will of these men and the relative humanity of Spanish slavery. Facing perhaps greater adversity as both slaves and women, Franklin’s protagonists have brought to light another aspect of the ingenuity and perseverance necessary to confront enslavement.

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